

# FISHING HOLE

## KNIFE LAKE

**WHY GO:** This expansive border lake requires some effort to reach, but could be worth it for the angler that knows where and how to sort out this two-story fishery, with big lake trout down deep, and walleyes and fat smallmouth bass that are more shallow. It's a beautiful border lake with an arm that reaches south

**ACCESS:** There are 11 portages from Knife to other lakes (not including a couple of portages that connect one arm of the lake to the other), but the most common access to the lake is through the lake and river system to the west of Knife from Ely-based entry points. It can also be approached from Gunflint Trail-based entry points, with Sea Gull Lake or the border route via Saganaga Lake. There's about 50 campsites in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) portion of this lake

**VITALS:** Most of Knife's 4,919 acres are in Minnesota, with 3,711 acres south of the border, and another 1,208 acres in Ontario. Stateside, it is entirely within Lake County and the BWCAW. In Canada, the lake is entirely inside Quetico Provincial Park. The lake has a maximum depth of 179 feet

**GAME SPECIES PRESENT:** Bluegill, burbot, cisco, lake trout, lake whitefish, northern pike, rock bass, smallmouth bass, walleyes and white sucker.

**BIG LAKERS:** The lake was most recently surveyed in 2017 out of Minnesota DNR's Tower area office, which noted the lake deep, cold, well-oxygenated water that support a cold-water fishery including lake trout, lake whitefish, cisco and burbot.

Those high-calorie cisco help propel an excellent lake trout population on Knife, which produced better than average gillnet catch rates of lakereels, with fish up to 32.5 inches, and an average at just over 22 inches. The aver-

age laker in the survey weighed just over 4 pounds.

Illustrating the delicate nature of this lake trout population, of the fish that were aged from the survey, they ranged from 2 to 28 years of age. DNR pointed out that a 26-inch lake

trout from Knife, on average, would be about 20 years old.

It could be a long haul getting to Knife in the winter, or for the May opener. It could also be worth it, if you're into big lakereels. Because its entire U.S. portion sits inside the BWCAW, the trout season on Knife opens up Dec. 29.

Search for them over deep water with big jigs and other chunky metal baits and dead stinkbait, such as cisco or smelt.

You'll have to get at them shallow in the spring, trolling in-line spinners in transition areas between shallow and steep drop-offs. Flipping a lure along the front of a sheer rock face can often get a couple of younger "eater" trout.

**WALLEYES:** The 2017 survey turned up a catch rate of 9.2 walleye per net, which is the highest on record for the lake. The largest walleye caught was 23.5 inches and the average was just over 16 inches.



DNR's aging data suggested that growth rates were good on this lake, and fish up to 11 years old turned up.

Canoe country walleyes are a typically difficult catch come wintertime, but spring and summer in these parts can offer some of the best action anywhere, in my opinion.

**THE REST:** There's northern pike in Knife, and the average weight in the survey was just under 4 pounds. The longest pike surveyed was 38 inches. Smallmouth bass, which were the only species on record ever to be stocked in the lake (back in 1941), appear to be doing well. Bluegill were sampled in the lake for the first time in 2017, with 10 fish caught in one net on the far east end, and a single 'gill caught in a net on the far west end. The biggest bluegill sampled was 8 inches. Knife's whitefish catch was considered average for the area, and the largest fish was 21 inches. Deep-water cisco were captured, with the average size at 7 inches. These are a major forage for the lake's predator fish.—*Javier Serna*

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